



# STATE OF CONNECTICUT

## DEPARTMENT OF REHABILITATION SERVICES

### Department of Rehabilitation Services Testimony before the Appropriations Committee February 22, 2013

Good morning Senator Harp, Representative Walker and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Amy Porter, Commissioner of the Department of Rehabilitation Services, and I thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss Governor Malloy's proposed budget for the Fiscal Years 14 and 15 biennium.

#### **Budget**

The Department currently has a combined federal and state budget of approximately \$76 million. Our services are diverse and our funding reflects this diversity. On a state level, we currently have funding appropriated through the General Fund, the Workers' Compensation Commission Fund, and the Special Transportation Fund. On a federal level, we receive funding from the U.S. Department of Education, the Social Security Administration, and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. The distribution of our almost \$76 million budget is about one quarter state and three quarters federal funds.

We understand the challenge that the Governor and the legislature face in developing this biennial budget, and we would like to describe some of the proposed changes within the DORS state budget.

#### **Incentivize Use of Agency Teachers for Students who are Blind or Have Visual Impairments**

Because blindness is a low incidence disability, the State has looked at multiple ways to deliver accessible education to students who are blind or have visual impairments. Currently, school districts can either obtain teachers for students with visual impairments at no cost through the Department, or they can hire their own teachers and seek reimbursement for the salary of their teachers. The budget removes funding to reimburse towns for this activity. Towns may choose to continue to hire and pay their own teachers of the blind, but they will not receive any reimbursement from the state for those costs. Since reimbursement dollars will no longer be available, some additional towns may decide to obtain DORS teachers to serve their students. This will centralize teacher services for children who are blind and allow for easy adjustments in teacher caseload assignments as the students move from town to town.

#### **Eliminate State Funds for Independent Living Centers**

The Department has provided state funding in the past to maintain the operation of five (5) Centers for Independent Living across the state. The Centers provide an array of services for individuals with disabilities, including peer counseling, independent living skills training, advocacy and information and referral services. The proposed budget eliminates the state funding of \$528,680. Each of the five centers receives federal funding, which totaled approximately \$1,240,000 in Federal Fiscal Year 13.

### **Reduce Funding for Employment Opportunities Program**

The Employment Opportunities Program (EOP) enables individuals with the most significant disabilities to engage in and retain integrated, competitive employment. The EOP assists individuals with a wide range of significant physical, mental and intellectual disabilities [who are otherwise not eligible for DDS or DMHAS], who, after completing a plan of intensive vocational rehabilitation, receive long-term employment supports in order to maintain ongoing competitive employment. The availability of EOP services, in the absence of any other long-term funding source, is required for these individuals to access the vocational rehabilitation services provided by DORS. EOP currently serves approximately 280 persons annually.

With a 29% reduction in the funding available, we will likely establish and maintain a waiting list for these services.

### **Personal Services**

We currently have approximately 450 employees who provide an array of services, including direct services to about 15,000 individuals with disabilities, adjudication for approximately 41,000 disability claims, and sign language interpreting services to a wide range of federal, state, municipal and private entities. The biennial budget provides sufficient funding within the Personal Services account to adequately fund the Department's programmatic infrastructure. This will allow each of our programs to continue services to support individuals with disabilities, businesses, and other key stakeholders within the State of Connecticut.

The budget also references a collaborative relationship between our Department and the new Department on Aging. We will work together to leverage resources for the provision of administrative support.

Through this fiscal year, we have continued to receive administrative support from multiple agencies within the Executive Branch during this time of transition, particularly the Department of Social Services and the SmART unit at the Department of Administrative Services. I would like to publicly thank Commissioners Bremby and DeFronzo and their staffs for their support.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of the Governor's recommended biennial budget. I would be happy to answer any questions.